

# The Power of Connection: Peers

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Presented by Andrea Beachnau



# The Dance



# Today's Agenda



Define Friendship: Who, What, Where

Benefits of Friendship & Impacts of Isolation

Barriers to Friendship & Interventions to Address Barriers

Finding Peer Connections to Build Lasting Friendship

# Defining Friendship

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What It Means, What It Looks Like  
& Where To Find It



# Defining Terms

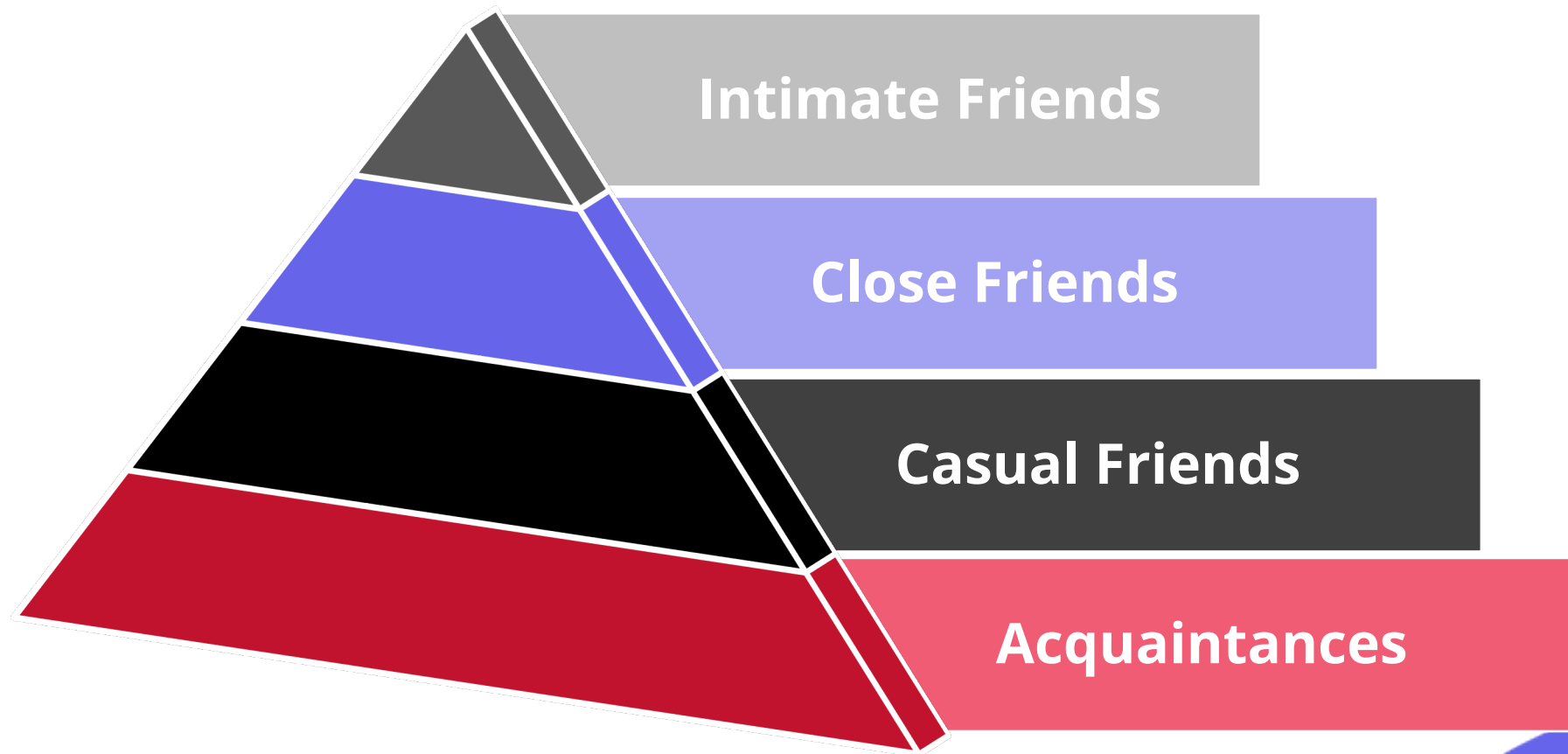
## **Peer** /pir/ noun

- a person who is equal to another in abilities, qualifications, age, background, and social status *dictionary.com*
- one that is of equal standing with another, especially one belonging to the same societal group based on age, grade, or status *merriam-webster.com*

## **Friend** /frend/ noun

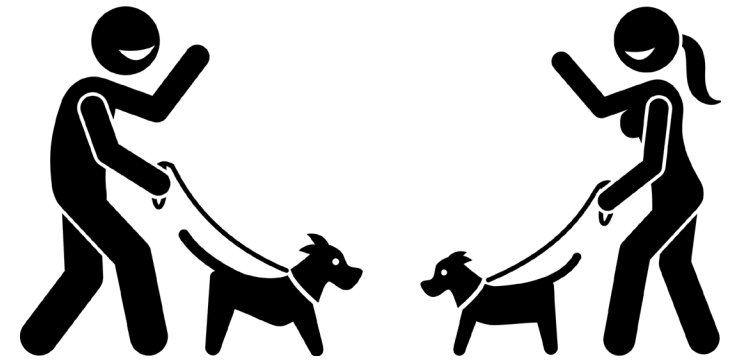
- a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard *dictionary.com*
- one attached to another by affection or esteem *merriam-webster.com*

# Friendship Progression



# Acquaintances

- Networking Potential
- Low-Expectation Conversation
- Reduced Social Anxiety
- Feeds Our Need to Belong
- Exposes You to New Perspectives/Ideas



# Casual or Social Friends



- Widening Your Circle of Friends
- Easy, Low-Pressure Dialogue
- Communicate on Shared Interests
- Being a Part of a Community
- Expand Outside of Normal Daily Interactions



# Close Friends

- Deeper Connections
- Encouragement & Advice
- Help When Need
- Dependable Fun
- Shared History



# Intimate or Best Friends



- Freedom to Truly Be Yourself
- Stable, Judgment-Free Support
- Mutual Love & Loyalty
- There For the Good & the Bad

# Where To Find Friendship



- Current Network
- Community Events
- Join Local Club, Group, Class
- Online Groups & Gaming
- Go For a Walk

# Importance of Friendship

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Benefits of Friendship &  
Impacts of Lack of Friendship



# Benefits of Friendship

## Peers with and Peers without Disabilities

- Improve Mental & Physical Health
- Improve Cognitive, Language, & Social Development
- Provide Shared Experiences
- Increase Sense of Belonging/Community Connection



# Benefits of Friendship

## Peers without Disabilities



- Increased Understanding of Differences & Diversity
- Increased Awareness, Acceptance, and Compassion
- Learn New Skills

# Impacts of Lack of Friendship

- Social Isolationism & Loneliness
- Health Risks
- Increased Bullying
- Decreased Confidence & Motivation
- Decreased Cognitive, Language, & Social Development



# Barriers to Friendship

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Environmental, Personal Level for Peers with Disabilities & Peers without Disabilities





# Environmental Barriers

## Segregation

- Isolated Seating
- Separate Classroom
- Separate Program
- Separate Employment

## Lack of Understanding

- Disability Awareness
- Stereotypes
- Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC) or American Sign Language (ASL)
- Other Assistive Technology (AT)

## Lack of Access

- Inaccessible Community Events
- Physical Barriers
- Alternative Curriculum
- Inaccessible Transportation

# Personal Barriers for a Peer with a Disability



Limitations in Interpersonal Skills



Misunderstandings in Communication



Limitations in Ability to Disclose Unique Needs



Limitations in Finding Empathetic, Flexible, Supportive Peers

# Personal Barriers for a Peer without a Disability



Lack of Understanding of Disability



Lack of Patience in Communicating



Lack of Understanding Unique Needs

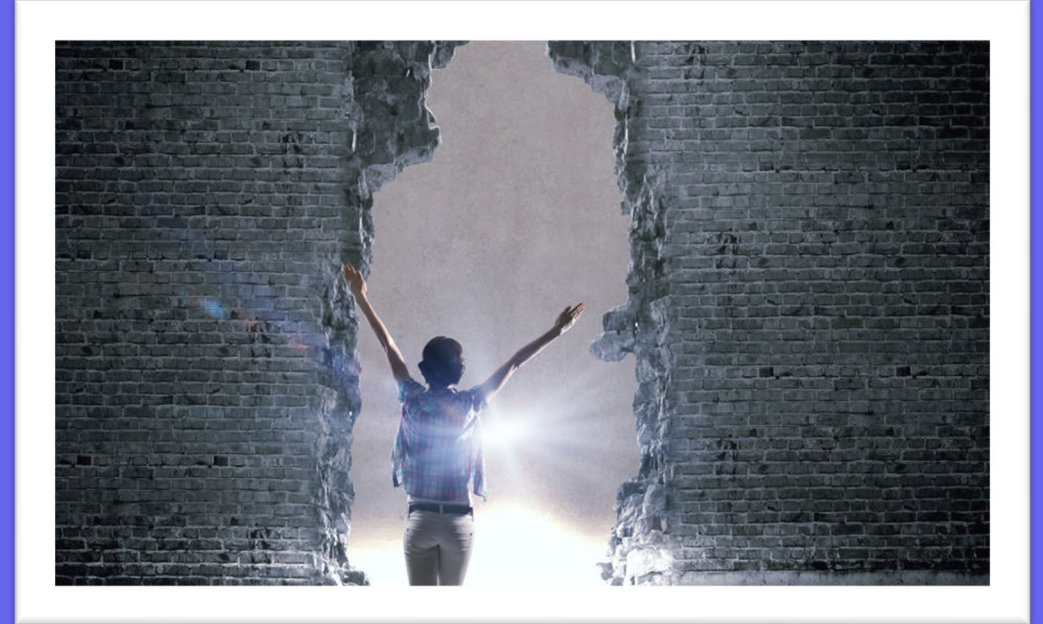


Fearful of Bullying

# Breaking Down Barriers

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Environmental, Personal Level for  
Peers with Disabilities & Peers  
without Disabilities



# Breaking Down Environmental Barriers



- Inclusion From the Start
- Promote Disability History/Awareness
- Advocate for Accessibility for All

# Inclusion From the Start

- Universal Design
- National Policy & Legislation
- Inclusive Employment
- Reasonable Accommodations
- Independent Living



# Disability History/Awareness



- Educate on Disability History
- Educate on All Disabilities
- Promote the Teaching of Disability Rights Movements
- Promote Disability Awareness in Home, School Community

# Advocate for Accessibility for All

- Programs/Activities
- Scheduling
- Buildings/Sidewalks
- Items/Equipment
- Transportation





# Breaking Down Barriers: Peers with Disabilities



- **Least Restrictive Environment**
- **Target Skills Through Individualized Education Program (IEP)**
- **Teach Self-Advocacy Skills & Create Spaces for Sharing**

# Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Educational placement is the setting where your child receives his or her education and services. Schools must place students in the least restrictive environment (LRE). **That means students must be placed in the general education setting to the greatest extent appropriate to receive supports and services as determined by the individualized education program team.**



# Teach Skills Through the Individualized Education Program (IEP)

- Interpersonal Skills Goals
- Behavior Goals
- Communication Goals
- Teach Alternative Communication Methods
- Assistive Technology
- Accommodations/Modifications

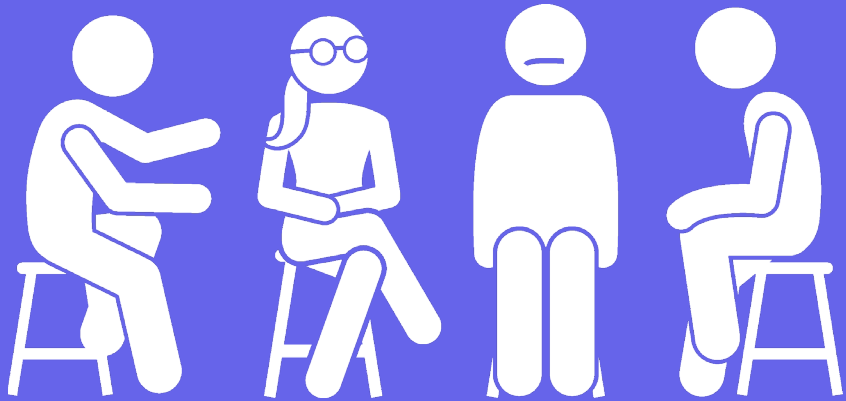


# Self-Advocacy Skills & Sharing Spaces

- Speaking Up for Yourself
- Communication Strengths, Preferences, Interests, Needs (SPIN)
- Being Able to Listen to the Opinions of Others
- Owning Responsibility
- Understanding Your Rights
- Knowing to Ask for Help/Accommodation



# Breaking Down Barriers: Peers without Disabilities



- Seek to Understand Disability
- Practice Communication Skills

# Seek to Understand Disability/Neurodiversity

- See Benefits to Differences
- Avoid Stereotypes
- Participate in Accessible Activities
- Accommodate Needs
- Be Ally Against Ableism



# Practice Communication Skills



- Understand There Are Different Ways to Communicate
- Educate on Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Devices or Assistive Technology
- Use People First Language

# Breaking Down Barriers: Peers with & without Disabilities



- **Provide Opportunities for Social Connection Outside of School/Work**
- **Utilize Peer to Peer Support Models**



# Make Relationships a Priority



- Intentional Connections
- Provide Opportunities for Social Connection Outside of School/Work
- Model Being a Good Friend

# Utilize Peer to Peer Support Models

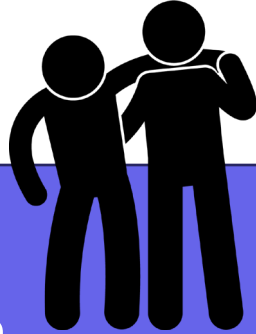
- Evidence-Based Practice
- Formal Pathway to Connection
- Promotes Consistent Participation in Shared Activities
- Use Peers with Different Skillsets



# Peer Model: Helping vs. Participating

## What It Looks Like for Peers

### Helping



- Peers put in an adult role
- Peers telling peers what to do and what not to do
- Peers watching peers do schoolwork or eat lunch
- Peers leading peers to classroom

### Participation



- Peers being peers
- Peers playing with peers
- Peers working together on the same schoolwork
- Peers walking with each other
- Peers learning about neurodiversity

# Peer Model: Helping vs. Participating

## Why It's Important

### Helping



- Not Mutually Beneficial
- Peers Viewed Differently
- Lowers Expectations
- Power Over Another
- Perpetuates Ableism

### Participation



- Mutually Beneficial
- Peers Viewed Equally
- Raises Expectations
- Power Neutralized
- Promotes Inclusion
- Creates Allies

# Finding Friends

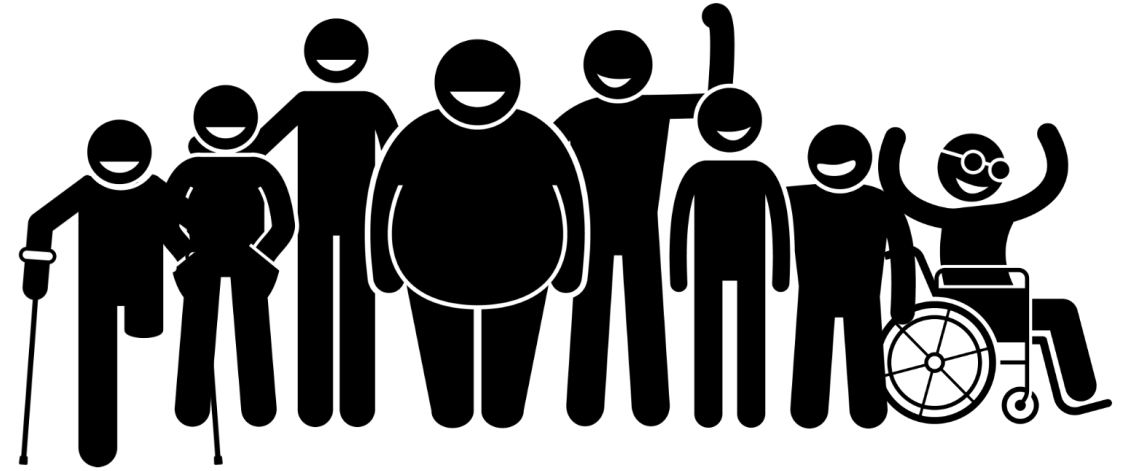
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Peers with Disabilities and Peers without Disabilities



# All of Us

- Be Authentic
- Accept Yourself First
- Join a Group or Class
- Explore Social Media Outlets
- Find Your People
- Make Yourself Available



# Peers with Disabilities



- Be a Self-Advocate
- Build Up Communication Skills
- Seek Anti-Ableist Friendships

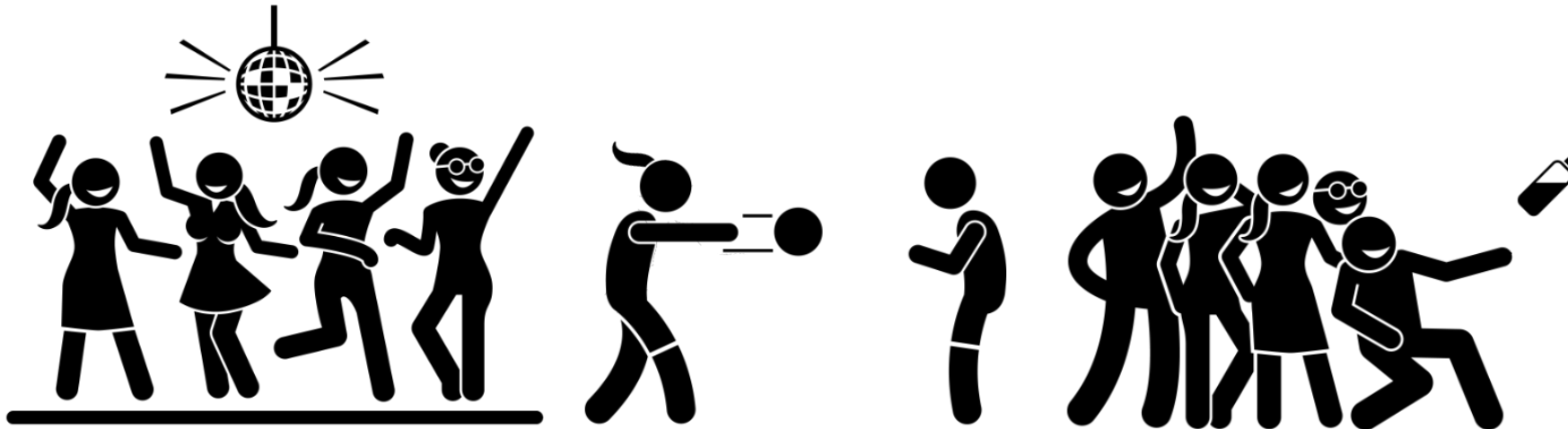
# Peers without Disabilities

- Make an Effort to Understand Disability/Neurodiversity
- Make Plans – Include Them/Invite Them
- Communicate Clearly
- Respect Sensory and Social Differences
- No Charity Friendships





# Back to The Dance





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# Michigan Alliance for Families

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